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ANATOLIAN
ROCK
:
PHENOMENA
OF
HYBRIDIZATION

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Anatolian rock—what does it sound like? Why does it sound the way it sounds? How has it started and how can this music be contextualized? These are some simple questions to begin with. I will try to answer them following a musico-ethnological approach, which is rooted in Alan P. Merriam and Jacques Attali's ideas of music as culture and music as politics, complemented with a historical perspective (Merriam 1964; Attali 1985).¹

So, what does it sound like? A first and early example is a tune called "Abudik Gubudik Twist" by Adnan Varveren, recorded around 1965. This tune is played with Turkish instruments, sung partly in Turkish partly in English, and shows a smooth, apparently natural transition from Turkish folk to American twist music. It contains both Anatolian folk and Western pop. The title, "Abudik Gubudik," means "weird," "strange," or "odd." In fact, this tune is mocking twist music. We will later come back to this tune and its specifics.

1 Many thanks to Volga Coban and Akin Kazuk for their helpful corrections and comments throughout this paper.



Fig. 1: Boat on the Bosphorus named after Barış Manço.
Photo: Holger Lund (2013).

The First Wave of Global Pop

To provide some historical background: Anatolian rock belongs to the first wave of global pop, which took place from the end of the 1950s through to the 1980s worldwide, including countries such as Uzbekistan, Nepal, North Korea, and Mongolia. After the first wave of global pop, the second wave followed, so-called 'world music,' which was released on labels like Peter Gabriel's Real World Records (1989 onward). Like the earlier 'exotica' genre it was primarily produced by Western music companies for the Western market and its aural tourists (Regev 2013: 23). From 2000 onward, a third wave of global pop emerged, so-called 'hyper pop.' Examples for the latter are offered by M.I.A. with tunes like "Bad Girls" (2012).

Also, relevant here are tendencies in hip-hop to use beats from all over the world, like the hip-hop-style double album *Dr. No's Oexperiment* by US DJ and producer Oh No, released in 2007 and based exclusively on Turkish funk and pop music samples. Another example is Action Bronson's use of Ferdi Özbeğin's jazzy "Köprüden Geçti Gelin" (1969), which he sampled for his tune "The Madness" (2012).

Back to the origins: three more short examples of Turkish participation in the first wave of global pop will give you a more precise idea of what we are talking about. The chosen examples include some of the most popular figures of Anatolian rock: Erkin Koray, Barış Manço, and Cem Karaca. Barış Manço was the most popular of them all, and even today ships are named after him (fig. 1).

- Example 1: Erkin Koray—"Cemalim" (1974)
The music is played with the typical instrumental setting of a rock band, it sounds like Anglo-American rock, until the guitar comes in and composition, melody, and harmonies become Turkish. Indeed, the composition is based on a Turkish folk tune, a *türkü*, composed by Refik Basaran and entitled "Şen Olasın Ürgüp." The Turkishness is enforced through the lyrics sung in the language and with a phrasing typical for Turkish song.
- Example 2: Barış Manço—"Dere Boyu Kavaklar (Kolbastı)" (1975)
Manço's "Dere Boyu Kavaklar (Kolbastı)" is a *türkü*, from the Black Sea region. The intro is performed on a Turkish instrument, an electrified saz, combined with electric guitar. The singing is again in Turkish, composition, melody, and harmonies as well, while the rest of the tune is Western, as is the band's fashion sense, featuring long hair and some psychedelic clothing.
- Example 3: Cem Karaca—"Obur Dünya" (1973)
The music starts in a Turkish folk manner with the zurna, a double-reed wind instrument, playing solo, then Turkish percussion jumps in combined with a drum set, sounding almost traditional, until an electric guitar begins to play alongside the Turkish vocals. Later, an electric bass and a hard drumbeat transfer the tune into a Western musical idiom.

These four sound examples from Varveren's "Abudik Gubudik Twist" to Karaca show different ways of building musical hybrids. Two patterns are involved: the relation between the different parts and the amalgamation of these parts. Even though the language is still separated into English and Turkish parts, Adnan Varveren's tune shows strong amalgamation. The twist sounds grow naturally out of the Turkish folk music, as if there were no ruptures between the styles at all. In contrast, Cem Karaca sticks to a sort of juxtaposition, where a Turkish folk part precedes a Western-dominated rock part. Erkin Koray and Barış Manço build a continuous mix of both Turkish and Western elements to construct their musical hybrids. Karaca, Koray, and Manço are all singing continuously in Turkish, combining Turkishness at a linguistic level with Western rock music.²

2 The complete picture, of course, includes Koray, Manço, and Karaca singing cover versions of Western pop with Turkish lyrics and also own songs written in English.

If we look at the history of these musical hybrids, three key dates stand out: 1957, 1965, and 1923. This order is not chronological, but helpful to understand the development.

First 1957: European, Arabic, and Turkish radio stations played surf rock by the Tornados or the Ventures and films with Elvis Presley and Bill Haley were shown in Turkish cinemas. This inspired musicians like Erkin Koray to start playing cover versions of rock 'n' roll tunes on the new electric guitar as early as 1957 (see Wald 2025). According to recent research by Elijah Wald "the first rock 'n' roll band seems to have been formed in 1955 by students at the Naval Academy led by the drummer Durul Gence, who played covers of US hits, and began performing in clubs and concerts outside the school under a pseudonym." Wald also brings Erol Büyükburç into play, who "began singing US and European songs with the İsmet Siral band in the late 1950s." Wald states: "In 1961 he [Büyükburç] recorded a series of singles on the Odeon label, beginning with Neil Sedaka's 'One Way Ticket' b/w the Diamonds' 'Little Darling' and Sedaka's 'Oh, Carol' b/w his own English-language composition, 'Little Lucy,' which were very popular, and prompted national tours on which he mixed English-language rock 'n' roll and Turkish folk and pop songs" (ibid.). It seems that Barış Manço's single "The Jet/Twist in USA" was the first pop single by a Turkish artist, released in Turkey in 1962. Therefore, it took some years of playing cover versions of American pop music until the first release of this music on vinyl. So, it seems Büyükburç and Manço have been the earliest ones to release pop music on records in Turkey.

In 1962, İlham Gencer covered Bob Azzam's "C'est écrit dans le ciel" under the title "Bak Bir Varmış Bir Yokmuş." He was the first to fully realize a cover in Turkish. In 1966, Erkin Koray released his first single with "It's So Long" on one side and his own version of the Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black," called "Bir Eylül Akşamı" on the flip. Among the first to leave the cover versions for Anatolian folk music was Tülay German with her song "Burçak Tarlası," released in 1964. Turkish musicians, including female artists like Tülay German, Ajda Pekkan, Rana Alagöz, and Ayla Dikmen were among the earliest participants in the first wave of global pop worldwide.³

"Burçak Tarlası" by Tülay German is already a fully developed example for a musical hybrid, a blueprint for what would follow historically, as demonstrated by the musical examples at the beginning: Turkish folk and Western elements combined in language, instrumentation, rhythm, melody, and harmonies. In 1966, the term *Anadolu pop* was coined by keyboardist Murat Ses, who had joined the band Silüetler, and then in 1971 the term was used as the title of an LP by Moğollar (fig. 2) and again in 1983 by Ersen ve Dadaşlar (fig. 3).

3 Later on, female artists became dominant: "The Turkish pop industry was once dominated by female vocal funk and synthesizer pop [...] over a 30 years gestation period" (Votel 2013).

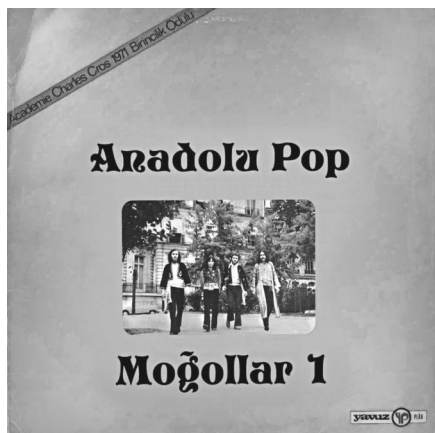


Fig. 2: Record cover of *Anadolu Pop* by Moğollar (1971).

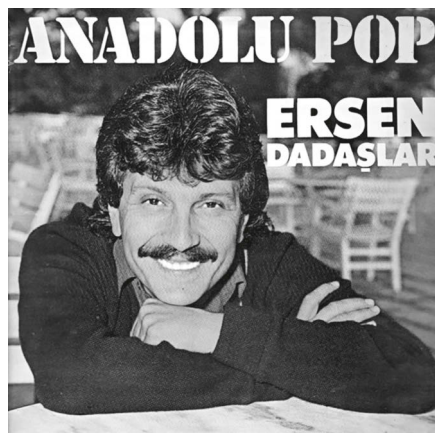


Fig. 3: Record cover for *Anadolu Pop* by Ersen ve Dadaslar (1983).

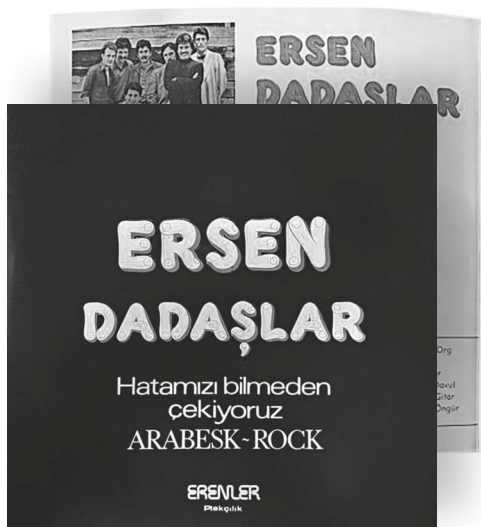


Fig. 4: Record cover for *Arabesk-Rock* by Ersen ve Dadaşlar (1980).

The term changed to *Anadolu rock*, meaning Anatolian rock, a notion most probably introduced by Moğollar (see Karahasanoğlu/Skoog 2009: 60–61). The term *arabesk rock* also emerged later (fig. 4).

All these terms were used to describe the same synthesis of Western pop or rock and Anatolian folk (Spicer 2011: 42). Many of these tunes were based on *türkü*, often written by composers like Neşet Ertaş, Aşık Mahzuni, and Aşık Veysel. And just to be clear: the term Anatolian rock is not bound to Anatolians playing rock music, but used as an umbrella term for all sorts of music which combine different styles of Western pop and rock, psychedelic, funk, disco, progressive, folk, and so on with Anatolian folk music. At the same time all these terms function as a differentiation, separating a specific version of pop-rock music from purely traditional styles of music on the one hand and from Western pop-rock music on the other (Regev 2013: 53).

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And it was found by Gökalp in Anatolia, as Anatolian folk music was a pre-Islamic, secular music and for him it “represented the essence of Turkish culture” (Hecker 2012: 2).

So, the new music for the new nation consisted partly of a very old, even pre-Islamic and pre-Ottoman music. For the other part, Gökalp was convinced that European classical music had to be regarded as the peak of Western civilization. Pierre Hecker relates: “With this in mind, he proposed a synthesis of Anatolian and European music traditions” (ibid.). The main point here is that Gökalp’s political strategy for infusing a new music into the new nation from the start in 1923 contained the idea of a “modernized” and “westernized” Turkish folk music (Özbek 1997: 182). Hence, as Daniel Spicer says, “conditions were perfect for Western pop music to take root” (Spicer 2011: 42). Martin Stokes calls this concept “nationalistic cosmopolitanism” (Stokes 2000)⁶ as part of a musical strategy of the state, welcoming Western music to merge with indigenous folk music, opening the path for the aforementioned other two dates, the start of rock ‘n’ roll in 1957 and the Hürriyet song contest in 1965.

6 Regev brings in another concept, that of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism. It “refers to the ongoing formation, in late modernity, of world culture as one complexly interconnected entity, in which social groupings [...] share wide common grounds in their aesthetic perceptions, expressive forms, and cultural practices” (Regev 2013: 3).

According to Regev this aesthetic cosmopolitanism is based on an “expressive isomorphism” (ibid.: 30), that means “music consciously created and produced by using amplification, electric and electronic instruments, sophisticated recording equipment (including samplers) [...] filtering all these through sound editing, modification, and manipulation devices” (ibid.: 18).

Furthermore, Regev stresses the “status of pop-rock music as a signifier of a universal modernity” (ibid.: 4), and describes non-Western pop-rock music as a “quest for status, participation, and parity in the modern world culture” (ibid.: 10).

While this seems to be quite true, Stokes’ paradoxical expression brings the intersection of national and global components much more in focus and his terms are preferred here. The nationalistic component is the point of view from which a cosmopolitan perspective is developed for the case of Turkish pop-rock music. Still Regev’s ideas on musical nationalism have their value: “The historical musical event of pop-rock is [...] the event that altered the way musical nationalism [...] is practiced and experienced.” It “admitted openness to ‘otherness.’ Musical nationalism has mutated from being organized, primarily, around acoustic sonorities to a realm in which amplified, electric and electronic sounds are the standard mode of making music.”

And “it afforded [...] the execution of a change in cultural orientation from being directed toward separatism to one that embodies aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (all quotes ibid.: 96).

But history wasn't that easy. The attempts to construct a new Turkish music were a big failure at first. In the 1930s, Turkish radio played Western music like waltzes, tango, and jazz as well as European operas in Turkish translation. In government-sponsored ballrooms, Western music was preferred, Turkish music was even banned from the radio for several months (see Özbek 1997: 182; Yazıcıoğlu 2010: 241). But Western polyphony failed to attract, and in consequence the people turned to Arab radio stations, especially Egyptian and Lebanese, instead of the Turkish ones, and Eastern infusions became increasingly popular.⁷ Later on, parallel to the *Anadolu pop* and *rock* music in the 1960s, an Arab-like music was invented, called *arabesk*, relying mainly on Eastern music traditions. An example from the year 1973 by one of the most famous *arabesk* singers is Orhan Gencebay's "Dertler Benim Olsun." Typical for the *arabesk* genre are the singing in Arabic style and the Arabized strings. Before we come to the relationship between *Anadolu pop* and *arabesk*, which gives character to both styles, we should take a look at the East-West-conflict underlying each style, which could also be heard in the four examples of Anatolian rock provided at the beginning.

The Electrification

The Eastern music tradition is connected to the music of the Ottoman past, meaning a music that ranges from Asian to Persian as well as from Arabic to Balkan sources. To simplify things a little, one could say that the Eastern music tradition is *makam*-based, consisting of defined types of interval structures and melodic structures used in classical Turkish music. It is monophonic and microtonal music. A typical instrument for this kind of music would be the *saz*, which later became very prominent in *arabesk* music. Western music tradition on the contrary is well-tempered and polyphonic like European classical music. A typical instrument for this kind of music would be the piano or the violin. The new Anglo-American pop-rock music had the guitar as its most typical instrument, well established in European classical music, but now electrified. This electrification made it a symbol for a young, modern, and urban music.

The opposition of 'saz vs. electric guitar' symbolically shows the antipodes, which, however, were not antipodes at all in the actual musical practice. Moreover, historically the guitar and the *saz* are not antipodes, but rather cordophonic instruments which go back to ancient Arabic-Persian instruments such as the *santur* (Votef 2013). All types of mixtures of East and West

7 For a more thorough discussion of the concepts of 'East' and 'West' in this context, see Lund 2026/2020: 145.

took place, in *arabesk* as well as in Anatolian rock, and perhaps the perfect symbol for these mixtures is the electrified saz as an old Eastern instrument driven by modern Western electricity. The range goes from the *arabesk* singer and saz player Orhan Gencebay to electric saz players Hakkı Bulut and Arif Sağ, who played both *arabesk* and Anatolian rock, sometimes even mixed, to electric guitar players like Erkin Koray and Barış Manço.

- Example 1: In Orhan Gencebay's "Hatasız Kul Olmaz" (1977) one can hear an acoustic saz but also an electric saz. Typical for Gencebay is the string section.⁸
- Example 2: In Arif Sağ's "Osman Pehlivan (Püfde)" (1973), the electric saz, allegedly invented by either Sağ himself or by Erkin Koray, is in the foreground, with a lot of wah-wah effect on it.
- Example 3: Despite being one of the most 'Western' musicians in Turkey, Barış Manço's version of "Gönül Dağı" (1973), a *türkü* composed by Neşet Ertaş, nevertheless relies heavily on an 'Eastern' *arabesk* string section.

To sum up: *arabesk* and Anatolian rock music were developed in parallel during the 1960s and coexisted until the end of the 1970s. Each style has Eastern and Western elements: the 'Eastern' *arabesk* has Western strings and is electrified, the 'Western' Anatolian rock has Eastern instruments like the saz or the zurna, as featured in the introduction of the Cem Karaca example above. Therefore, it is proposed that the opposition of *arabesk* vs. Anatolian rock should not be stressed as much as it has been done before (see Stokes 1999: 134–35; Bulut/Kaya 2010), but to have a closer look at the *arabesk*-Anatolian rock hybrids, which are not seldom at all. Here are two more striking examples of what makes Turkish music so rich in building hybrids:

- Example 1: In Yıldırım Çınar's "Kıbrız Kızı" (1974)⁹ rock drums and an electric saz are used, amalgamated with a traditional folk style in respect to composition, rhythm (asymmetrical 9/8), melody, harmonies, and instrumentation.
- Example 2: In Yıldırım Çınar's "Komşunun Kızı" (1974) deep hard drums can be heard, amalgamated with traditional folk style elements, but this time coming more from a rock approach due to the straight rhythm.

8 The Western violin was introduced to *makam*-based Turkish music between the 1930s and 1960s, due to Gökalp's and Atatürk's Westernization of the Turkish music as well as the influence of Egyptian music, which had already incorporated string sections into its popular music tradition. This kind of music was used by one of the first *arabesk* musicians, Suat Sayın, as reference (see Özbek 1997: 175).

9 In fact, not Yıldırım Çınar but his arranger Zafer Dilek should be credited for the hybrid here. Dilek has brought Western elements to Çınar's music which usually, without him as arranger, are not present.

Listening to these two examples one gets the clear idea that Yıldırım Çınar and his arranger Zafer Dilek had studied the developments in rock music and were now constructing an amalgam between traditional folk elements and Western rock music. Is this Anatolian rock? Yes, as it contains a Western rock drum set played in a rock style. Is this *arabesk* music? Yes, that too, just listen to the *arabesk* singing. It is a hybrid of Anatolian rock and *arabesk*, of which so many exist, often neglected in music perception and music studies since Western DJ and beat-making cultures are not able to work with asymmetrical rhythms and *arabesk* singing.

All the more: *arabesk* music has a 'bad' reputation, especially in Turkey itself. This has to do with its public. *Arabesk* was made for the poor rural immigrants and workers, living in informal *gecekondu* settlements in the periphery of the big cities like Istanbul. *Arabesk* music was also called 'minibus'-music due to the social group it aims to. It was even regarded as impure, dirty, degenerated with its Arabic and therefore non-Turkish orientation, being so far away from the bourgeois urban center and its well-educated, Western-orientated population.¹⁰

Between Westernization and Turkishness

Martin Stokes has made a very subtle analysis of the mixing of *arabesk* and Anatolian rock and its connotations: "If the guitar was turned up relative to the voice, the result was *Bati*: Western, intimate, polyphonic, the product of a shared group socio-musical process. If the reverse [if the voice was turned up relative to the rest], *Doğu*: Eastern, dependent on the authoritative, monophonic, coercive presence of the solo voice" (Stokes 1999: 124). Interestingly you may even have both structures, *batı* and *doğu*, in one tune.

To conclude, Anatolian rock may be perceived through two patterns: Turkishness and Western world as the first pattern, and the Turkishness itself ranging from *arabesk* to Anatolian rock, from East to West, as the second pattern. Hence the music reflects the range and problems of Turkish identity. Music on the Turkish territory was practiced in the Ottoman past, then separated from this past by state politics of the new Turkish Republic. Later on, this past came back via *arabesk*. The young Turkish Republic was orientated toward the modern Western culture, even by law, which did not work out at first. With the infusions of Western pop-rock music in the frame of the first wave of global pop, a Westernization took place, perhaps more intense than ever imagined by the founders of the Turkish Republic. This Westernization did not erase Turkishness, on the contrary it built up a new Turkish identity in hybridity.

¹⁰ This image is now corrected more and more in musical studies, see e.g. Stokes 2010. Problematic for a wider appreciation also seemed to be the partly transsexual connotations (e.g. Bülent Ersoy) of this music.

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